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ABSTRACT

As focal points for campuses, college unions must create environments that are stimulating and challenging for students but that allow students to relax enough to benefit from new experiences. Such environments must generate self-expression, exploration, and positive regard for multicultural perspectives. Special efforts should be made to ensure that all subpopulations feel comfortable, because to exclude anyone is to prevent him from receiving full benefit from his experiences. Communication methods, active and social programming, discussions of issues, and inservice staff development are all important aspects of the union environment. The extent to which the college union environment will contribute to student development depends on the support mechanisms available. 8 references. (Author/MSE)

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The college union

The living room of the campus

As focal points or "living rooms" for our campuses, college unions must create environments that are stimulating and challenging for students. Such environments must generate self-expression, exploration, and positive regard for multicultural perspectives. However, the extent to which our environments will contribute to the development of students depends on support mechanisms that are available at our college unions.

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The college union has long been considered the living room or hearthstone of the campus. It is a place for gathering, for exploring, for discussing, and for the continual process of community development. The union is a place to relax and enjoy the company of others. It provides the community with amenities necessary for daily life, including the opportunity to understand each other better.

The concept of the union should extend beyond the living room. The college union can offer a great deal of cocurricular education to a wide variety of constituencies. It is everybody's "turf," providing a supportive environment for student development. Students can gather with those different from themselves to learn from each other and members of the extended community as well.

The nature of the environment, however, can limit the ability to learn (Moos, 1979). Indeed, environments have been said to develop their own personalities (Moos, 1986). Schools must consciously create settings to encourage development. The union must be more than just a place for students to flop, be amused, and drink a Diet Coke. Union staffs have the opportunity to work with students at a place that belongs to everyone, feels comfortable to all, and alienates no one. A catalyst for development must be provided, or the potential for development is minimized.

To develop this environment, the union cannot neglect its living room aspect. This is the most persuasive rationale for developmental programming in the union. The living room meets primary needs that are requisites to growth. Maslow (1954) articulated a theory of motivation that describes when people can de-

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velop. Only when certain fundamental needs are satisfied can people relax enough to benefit from new experiences. Individuals have physiological and safety needs that presuppose any level of development. It is easy to be preoccupied with the primary needs. Once fed, sheltered, and safe, people must feel as though they belong. The union is a place where everyone should belong, where all should feel safe.

Special efforts must be made to ensure that every subpopulation on campus (minority students, non-traditional age students) feels comfortable. Anyone who feels excluded is prevented from receiving the full benefits from their experiences. An excluded student faces the added challenge of surviving in a difficult, possibly hostile environment.

One environmental issue, therefore, relates to inclusion. What images are projected by the union structure and staff members? Are there areas that alienate some subgroups? The building should not be sterile, and it must not offend. The environment must actively embrace all. What in the environment encourages a minority student to feel welcome? Do programs include non-mainstream students? How are they made to feel at home? If the union is an uncomfortable place for any subpopulation, it becomes exclusionary, condoning racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia.

Nevitt Sanford provides further support for maintaining the living room theory. Sanford (1966) states that a balanced support/challenge ratio is necessary for any growth to occur. If people feel too challenged without enough support, they withdraw and cannot learn. Does a new student feel supported in the union? If there is too much support without any challenge, then growth does not occur because there is no stimulus. Is there anything in the environment that sparks growth? This dynamic equilibrium is crucial to the behavioral outcome created by the combination of person and environment (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987).

Unions must balance the challenge of the learning room and the support of the living room. An excess of developmental stimulus without a comfortable environment could result in too much challenge. In this situation, development will occur only minimally. The union creates a developmental environment by offering a warm, supportive atmosphere and implementing a developmental education. A person walking through the union may see or hear something that is thought provoking, something that helps him or her to make meaning out of life. This experience enriches the college experience by educating the whole person, not just the intellect.

Many commonly used communication methods can contribute to a developmental environment. These communications then become passive programs. Something the passerby sees can grab and influence. An attractive and effective poster hung in a prominent place can have an impact on a large population. Another example of passive programming is a relevant videotape played in a high traffic area. Traditional-age students are a television generation who are easily seduced by the screen. People stop, watch, and stay as they become involved with the images they see. The hypnotic effect of television can be used in a positive, educational fashion. Quality videos on hot topics such as substance abuse, acquaintance rape, AIDS, and racism are currently available. The timing of these programs as well as the topic are very important. Sensitivity and judgment in the presentation of such issues are imperative for positive results.

Active programs are another traditional source of developmental programming. The union should provide a variety of programs on relevant topics. Social programs can be a subtle yet effective avenue for development. What kind of entertainment does the union provide? When was the last time the union challenged the boundaries of Western culture?

Students can explore multiculturalism through social programs. The celebration can be uplifting and provocative. Students can benefit from incorporating the diversity of the community into their lives (Stewart & Hartt, 1986). When choosing programs, do not place cultural limits on selections. There is an abundance of women's music and oriental arts from which to choose. Awaken an ethnocentric student body to the riches of the world through international festivals. International students can take part in the planning and feel appreciated by the community. Students can share traditional foods, clothing, music, art, and religion of other countries, bringing samples of faraway peoples closer to home.

Campus issues can be the impetus for programs designed to encourage growth. Panels comprised of student leaders and faculty can challenge the community effectively and inexpensively. Making students the protagonists creates an environment of questioning and exploring. This climate encourages students to be constructionists—persons capable of influencing, planning, and constructing their own environments (Banning, 1986). For students in the earlier stages of cognitive development, this can be just the right stimulus to move them from dualism or early multiplicity to late multiplicity (Perry, 1970). They learn to recognize the validity of their peers' opinions in this situation. Thus, students are simultaneously effecting the environment and being effected by it.

A final force on the union environment is the union staff. Professional and support staff greatly influence the students they encounter, and they should be sensitive to this power. Student employees also have a great impact on the union environment because they work directly with the union users. If the environment is to be developmental, staff must pay attention to student employees. Their attitudes about the union and the nature of their personal interactions can create either a negative or a positive environment for the user encountering that student.

In-service programs like the ones residence hall administrators have long used to train their paraprofessional staff (i.e., resident assistants) should be recognized as an important part of the union training also. Here, students can learn more than just proper union procedures. In-service is a time to explore how they interact with the community. How do they react when under stress from academics and how does this affect their conversations? Are they subtly racist? Does activity in the union support the institutional mission of the university? Is the staff aware of the mission of the union and its role on campus? Are students involved in the implementation of goals toward the mission's end? A workshop on transferable skills can demonstrate the relevance of a union job to their future. This will improve attitudes about working in the union and result in a more positive atmosphere. It will help students as individuals. Their development is just as important as the development of general union users.

The living room can easily be transformed into the learning room. It suggests a new paradigm, a different way of looking at the union. The mission does not change; only the way in which the mission is implemented changes. The result can be a more effective and more consistent developmental program.

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